

Timber and the rebuilding of Liberia

Liberia's forest sector could play a crucial role in the country's post-war reconstruction. But it needs help

LIBERIA'S 14-year civil war has taken a heavy toll. Although hostilities ended in 2003, schools, health centres and other services remain in a severe state of neglect. An estimated 150 000 people were killed in the conflict, and many hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people continue to live in camps where there is access to food and services. Across the country, all communities have been disrupted and dislocated in some way by the war.

Not least affected is forestry. In July 2003, the United Nations (UN) Security Council imposed strict sanctions on Liberia, prohibiting it from trading in wood (and diamonds) in an attempt to cut off revenue that was allegedly being used in the purchase of weapons and thereby to weaken the regime of Liberia's then president Charles Taylor. Since then the legal domestic logging industry has suspended all operations and there has been no significant export of wood.

In April 2005 ITTO sent a diagnostic mission* to Liberia with the aim of: identifying the most important factors constraining sustainable forest management (SFM) in the country; assembling those constraints in order of importance; and recommending actions to remove the constraints.

The mission team conducted interviews and meetings with various stakeholders, including the national Forest Development Authority (FDA), local government, bilateral and multilateral donors—particularly those involved in the Liberia Forest Initiative (LFI; see box)—forest concessionaires and wood processors, local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), district officers and the field representative of the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). It also collected and analysed existing reports, documents



Left-over: this armoured vehicle rusts in a field in Liberia's capital, Monrovia, a reminder of the country's recent civil war. *Photo: N. Sizer*

and statistics, particularly those generated recently by the international community.

Liberia's plight

Liberia has a population of around three million people, comprising 16 major ethnic groups as well as a small minority of Americo-Liberians who dominate politics. Infant mortality is estimated at almost 130 deaths per 1000 live births, and average life expectancy is only 48 years. Literacy is very low at around 15% and probably much lower in many rural areas. Current gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is only US\$169, making Liberia one of the poorest countries in the world.

State of the forest sector

The total land area of Liberia is 9.6 million hectares, more than half of which has some sort of forest cover (Figure 1). Closed and open dense forests cover 2.4 million and 1.0 million hectares respectively, while secondary and degraded forests cover about 2.2 million hectares.

It is impossible to assess the sustainable annual allowable cut (AAC) of Liberia's forests, since no forest inventory has been conducted in the last 40 years. Records of logged-

*The diagnostic team comprised Mr Pierre Méthot (Canada; team leader), Mr Samuel Appiah (Ghana), Dr Nigel Sizer (UK/USA), Mr Robert Simpson (USA; part-time), and Dr Francis Sio (Liberia). In addition the Liberian FDA made available the services of the following people: Mr Moses D Wogbeh, Sr, Manager—Community Forests; Mr Thomas Romeao Quiah, Sr, Deputy Managing Director—Commercial Forestry; Mr Cletus N. Togba, Special Assistant to Managing Director for Forest Conservation, and Mr Amos T. Suah, Coordinator—Planning, Research and Statistics. Many other FDA staff contributed to the diagnostic mission, and Dr Jean-Claude Nguinguiri, the ITTO regional officer based in Gabon, significantly contributed to initial planning and organisation as well as to mission logistics. This article is adapted from the executive summary of the mission's report.

Liberia Forest Initiative

A number of organisations with interests in forests are working in Liberia under the umbrella of the Liberia Forest Initiative, which aims to help reform Liberia's forest sector and promote the sustainable use of natural resources and biodiversity conservation. Partners in the Initiative include the US Government (acting through the USDA Forest Service International Program), the World Bank, the European Commission, Conservation International, the Environmental Law Institute, IUCN—the World Conservation Union, and several Liberian NGOs.

over areas and volumes extracted over the last 20 years are sketchy, incomplete and unreliable; many were destroyed during the war.

At the time of the imposition of the sanctions, 42 forest concessions covered a total of 5.95 million hectares (Figure 2). The system of awarding timber concessions in Liberia lacks transparency; it is currently being reviewed under the leadership of the LFI.

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Although the FDA has awarded a number of legal pit-sawing permits recently—because most of the sawmills in the country have been shut down—many truckloads of illegal pit-sawn wood are still entering Monrovia (the country's capital) each day. Only limited legal wood is available for local consumption.

Conservation value

In 1999 the West African Conservation Priority-setting Exercise funded by the Global Environment Facility identified the Upper Guinean Ecosystem, for which Liberia is home to the most intact remaining examples, as the top conservation priority in West Africa. These forests contain at least 2900 species of flowering plants, 240 timber species, 150 mammals, 620 birds, and 125 reptiles and amphibians. Some well-known species whose conservation may depend on Liberia's forests include the western chimpanzee, the red colobus monkey, the diana monkey, the pygmy hippopotamus and the forest elephant.

Liberia's two existing protected areas (Figure 1) cover less than 2% of the land area. These are the Sapo National Park

in the southeast (162 000 hectares, established in 1983), and the Nimba Nature Reserve in the north (14 000 hectares, established in 2003). Sapo National Park has recently been invaded by thousands of armed illegal hunters and miners; UNMIL is now assisting these people, many of whom are former combatants, to leave the park and return to their homes. Several new protected areas have been proposed.

Threats to forests

Major threats to the integrity of the forests include illegal and legal (but unsustainable) commercial hunting, conversion to small-scale agriculture (especially dry rice cultivation), and illegal alluvial mining for gold and diamonds, which causes great damage to rivers and streams. In the future, forests could also be threatened by an expansion of legal mining and road infrastructure, and possibly by conversion to industrial tree crops or oil-palm plantations, as well as by poorly managed commercial logging if the forest products' industry is not well regulated.

The institutional framework

The FDA has overarching responsibility and authority for all forest-sector activities covered under the National Forestry Law of 2000 and has substantial operational, management and financial autonomy. With a total staff of 500, the FDA has three departments: 1) Forest Conservation, responsible for protected areas, wildlife management and community forestry; 2) Commercial Forestry, responsible for all aspects related to forest management, logging, forest utilisation and reforestation; and 3) Administration and Finance.

A board of directors sets FDA policies and normally oversees its operations and finance. However, mismanagement during the Taylor regime, the looting and destruction of offices (and records) during the war, and a current lack of revenue, combined with a staff severely demoralised by the late payment of meagre salaries and also the personal trauma of war, mean that the FDA is barely able to function. The current salary of a forest ranger is US\$15 per month and the FDA's budget is now possibly as low as 1% its pre-war level.

The state of extractive activities

Commercial logging was a major component of the economy prior to the collapse of the Taylor regime in 2003; in 2002 it accounted for a quarter of GDP and 65% of foreign-exchange earnings. The sector generated up to US\$20 million per year in government revenues and around US\$100 million in exports, and directly employed about 7000 people.

At the moment, however, Liberia earns no export revenue from its timber sector; the UN sanctions against the timber trade will remain in place until three conditions have been met to the satisfaction of independent, international inspectors: 1) revenues generated from logging are administered correctly and not diverted to illegal uses; 2) the national government is in control of the forests; and 3) no militias are used by logging companies. Informal interviews

Greenery

Figure 1: Forest cover in Liberia showing the location of the Nimba Nature Reserve and the Sapo National Park



Source: Liberia Forest Re-Assessment Project—Conservation International and Flora and Fauna International (April 2004)

by the mission suggest that none of these conditions have yet been met.

Before the war, timber was processed in 27 sawmills and three plywood mills. The war destroyed 20 of these; the remaining nine sawmills and one plywood mill are dormant. The estimated installed capacity of these mills is about 95 000 m³ of logs per year.

Constraints to sustainable forest management

The most important thing for Liberia right now is stability and the restoration of law and order and good governance; achieving SFM will only be possible when sensible rules and regulations are enforced and adhered to. Paradoxically, though, the resurrection of the timber industry is badly needed to provide employment and foreign exchange, both of which are essential if the country is to rebuild and move towards sustainable development. It is therefore essential that appropriate mechanisms, processes and tools are put in place now to ensure the sustainable and fair use of forest resources as the timber industry resumes its operations.

However, forest policy and even recent post-war reform efforts have over-emphasised the commercial timber sector and given little attention to resource tenure and issues of high relevance to the poor, such as wild meat and fuelwood production (about 98% of the country's energy needs are met by fuelwood and charcoal). There is little understanding or awareness of these aspects. Nor does the FDA have guidelines, manuals of procedure or codes of best practice to guide its forestry activities, or adequate levels of professionals trained in SFM. There is no clear national strategy or plan for the forest sector, no forest development plan, and no forest policy paper. Moreover, there is no overall national land-use plan and the existing timber concession allocation system lacks transparency, probably doesn't capture the true value of the forest resources, and doesn't benefit forest-dependent communities.

Proposed priorities for possible ITTO actions

The mission believes that ITTO actions should tackle the most urgent areas that are not being addressed sufficiently by other international agencies and NGOs and should complement and support existing activities, projects and programs. ITTO actions should therefore focus on the following four main areas:

- improving knowledge about the resource and its utilisation;
- capacity-building;
- pilot preparation of an SFM plan; and
- supporting the genuine participation of local communities in the management and use of forest resources.

On hold

Figure 2: Forest concessions in Liberia



Source: Technical Secretariat of the Forest Concession Review, Liberia Forest Initiative (April 2005)

Actions to advance the cause of SFM in these four areas should include (but not be limited to):

- conduct a study of pit-sawing in Liberia, both legal and illegal, and formulate a project proposal for the integration of this with other activities designed to move the country towards SFM, and more specifically as a component of community forestry;
- prepare a series of forest guidelines covering such aspects as forest inventory, AAC, mapping, etc. Guidelines from nearby countries such as Ghana or Cameroon could probably be easily and cheaply adapted to the Liberian context by local consultants;
- conduct a series of field projects to improve knowledge about Liberia's forest resources, such as re-establishing permanent sample plots, conducting tree studies (to establish volume equations), conducting a national forest inventory, and calculating the AAC;
- prepare national guidelines for the preparation, implementation and monitoring of SFM plans;
- design and implement an outreach program to promote and explain SFM to all stakeholders;
- prepare and implement a detailed training plan, identifying specific programs, curricula, beneficiaries, venues, costs, etc, consisting of a series of short in-country training activities as well as scholarships and short courses abroad;

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- reinforce the capacity of the College of Agriculture and Forestry at the University of Liberia;
- design and implement a pilot project for the preparation of an SFM plan for an existing forest concession in Liberia in collaboration with a progressive forest concessionaire, the FDA and an NGO and with the



Essential products: 98% of Liberia's energy needs are met by fuelwood and charcoal.

Photo: N. Sizer

assistance of either a specialised consulting firm or an international NGO; and

- implement community-based forest management. This area should be a very high priority for ITTO engagement in Liberia. This would include:

... millions of dollars in international development assistance will undoubtedly be needed over the next few years if anything approaching sustainable management is to be achieved.

- a multi-stakeholder dialogue in selected rural areas to gain input from communities on their priorities for institutional arrangements within the communities to promote local forest management and other aspects
- legal reform and detailed legal regulations to facilitate community-based forest management, with multi-stakeholder input. This would include clarification of tenurial factors
- support for the establishment of pilot community-based forest management programs in different parts of Liberia
- the mapping of forestland ownership across Liberia and documentation of claims to forestland and
- the design and implementation of a sustainable wild-meat production project. This theme should be fully integrated into broader community-based forest management programs and activities and properly linked with biodiversity conservation, notably within production forests.

Immediate next steps

The case of Liberia is unique. Implementation of all the actions required to address the very numerous constraints to SFM presents incredible challenges. So many actions are required and so many variables and unknowns exist that it is impossible to elaborate a precise plan of action for the forest sector at present. Even the list given above might seem daunting given the general lack of capacity. However, some immediate actions could be undertaken by the Government

of Liberia that would help mobilise the support available through ITTO.

For example, the Government of Liberia should request support from ITTO to set up an inter-agency and multi-stakeholder coordination committee that would be responsible for following up on the diagnostic report, harmonising the interventions of donors, coordinating communications with ITTO and between the other donors, and preparing and submitting requests and proposals to ITTO.

The government should formally request ITTO assistance for the preparation of proposals, particularly under ITTO PROJECT PD73/89 (M,E,I): 'Assistance for project identification and formulation'. With ITTO assistance it should also convene a national workshop on the ITTO criteria and indicators to initiate a process of training and awareness among forestry professionals and other stakeholders about the principles of SFM.

International commitment needed

Rebuilding the physical, production, institutional and human infrastructure of the forestry sector to a level supportive of SFM will require large investments from both the private sector and the Government of Liberia that will be difficult to attract without significant support from the international community. Without a comprehensive audit of the entire sector it is impossible to assess how much will be required, but millions of dollars in international development assistance will undoubtedly be needed over the next few years if anything approaching sustainable management is to be achieved.

Reference

Bayol, N. & Chevalier, J-F. 2004. *Current state of the forest cover in Liberia: Forest information critical to decision making*. Final report to the World Bank. World Bank, Washington, DC, USA.